

THE MITZVAH WOMEN REFUSE TO MISS

You Heard the Shofar — Now What?

Rosh Hashanah Day Two Ladies' Class

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

You have just heard the shofar.

Normally, when we teach about shofar, we speak before the mitzvah. We try to prepare ourselves. We discuss what to think about, what to pray for, and how to use those precious moments. But today we are doing something different. You have already stood there. You have already heard the tekiah, the shevarim, and the teruah. You have already listened to that final, unbroken sound.

So I would like to begin not by telling you what you should have thought, but by asking you what happened.

Why did you make such an effort to hear the shofar this morning? What were you hoping would happen when those

sounds entered your ears? Were you thinking about yourself? Your children? Your grandchildren? Someone who needs a refuah? A marriage that needs strengthening? A child who needs direction? Eretz Yisrael? The safety of Klal Yisrael? Were you able to put it into words—or did you simply stand there with a heart too full for words?

And perhaps the deepest question is this:

What was your shofar praying for this morning?

That may sound like an unusual way to phrase the question. We generally say that a person davens and a shofar is blown. But one of the great ideas in the Torah sources we are going to study today is that the sound of the shofar is itself a form of tefillah. It is a prayer without sentences, without paragraphs, and without our having to find precisely the right words.

Before we develop that idea, however, let us begin with a surprising halachic contrast.

A Mitzvah Women Refuse to Miss

The mitzvah of shofar is a מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא a positive mitzvah bound to a particular time. Women are therefore not formally obligated in it. Nevertheless, for generations, so many Jewish women have treated shofar as something precious and indispensable. They arrange their day around it. They bring children to shul, find someone to watch the children, attend a later blowing, or ask that someone come to the house or hospital. It may not technically be an obligation, but it has

become a mitzvah that Jewish women refuse to miss whenever their circumstances allow.

That is beautiful. It reflects the attachment of Jewish women to a mitzvah that speaks directly to the neshamah.

Why? Why has this particular mitzvah taken such a powerful hold upon the hearts of Jewish women? Why does it

feel like something the neshamah does not want to live without?

To answer that, we have to understand why shofar reaches us so deeply.

When Words Are Not Enough

One of the great explanations of the shofar is that it is not merely a sound inserted into the davening. The shofar itself is a kind of tefillah.

Ordinarily, prayer is expressed through words. We praise Hashem, make requests, give thanks, confess, and ask for forgiveness. But on Rosh Hashanah, when so much is at stake and our hearts contain so much, words can seem terribly small.

What words adequately express what a mother or grandmother wants for her family in the coming year? How does a

person put into one sentence everything she feels about a struggling child? How do we ask for the safety of every Jew

in Eretz Yisrael? How do we pray for hostages, soldiers, bereaved families, people who are ill, and people whose pain we do not even know? What language can hold our gratitude for the blessings we have received together with our fear of what the new year may bring?

Sometimes we know exactly what to ask. At other times, we do not even know what the right outcome should be. We know only that something hurts, something is missing, or someone we love needs rachamim.

The shofar permits us to say to Hashem: "I do not have the words. Please hear what is underneath the words."

The Gemara discusses why the shofar of Rosh Hashanah should be bent and teaches:

כמה דכייף איניש דעתיה טפי מעלי

"The more a person bends and humbles himself, the better." (Rosh Hashanah 26b)

The bent shofar is the shape of the bowed heart. It is the instrument of a person who no longer feels the need to present a polished speech to Hashem. We do not arrive before the Ribbono Shel Olam with all the answers. We arrive bent, dependent, and honest.

There is also a beautiful connection to Channah. We need not review her entire story; everyone knows it. Channah stood before Hashem with a longing so deep that Eli HaKohen misunderstood what he saw. The Navi tells us:

וחנה היא מדברת על לבה רק שפתייה נעות וקולה לא ישמע

“Channah was speaking upon her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard.” (I Shmuel 1:13)

Channah teaches us about words that are almost without sound. The shofar gives us sound that is without words. In both cases, Hashem hears the heart beneath the external form.

Hashem Gives Us a Bypass

There is another dimension to the difficulty of speech.

Sometimes our problem is simply that we do not know what to say. But sometimes, especially during the Yamim Noraim, we are conscious that we have not always used the gift of speech properly. We remember words spoken in anger, gossip that should not have been repeated, criticism that may have been unnecessarily sharp, or something said thoughtlessly that remained in another person’s heart long after we forgot it.

A powerful mussar image is attributed to the Chafetz Chaim. He reminds us that the mouth is the instrument through which our tefillos ordinarily travel, and we know that we have not always treated that instrument with sufficient care. But Hashem does not close the door. He wants every honest tefillah and every movement of return. On Rosh Hashanah, He gives the heart an additional route while inviting us to repair the way we will use our words in the coming year.

We all know what a heart bypass is. When a passage carrying blood has become obstructed, the doctors do not say

that the heart is worthless. The heart is precious. The life within it must be protected. They create another pathway around the obstruction so that the blood can continue to flow.

The shofar is a spiritual bypass.

Sometimes we need a bypass not because the heart has nothing to say, but because the heart is carrying more than the mouth can deliver.

The heart wants to reach Hashem, but language is blocked. Perhaps we cannot organize the words. Perhaps the pain is too deep. Perhaps we are ashamed. Perhaps we are aware that our speech needs repair. Hashem says: “Then come to Me through breath. Come to Me through a cry. Come to Me through the shofar.”

The shofar begins with human breath. That breath passes through a simple horn, and what emerges is not a clever argument or a polished speech. It is a cry. It is the voice of the neshamah before the words have been edited.

The bypass does not remove our responsibility to improve our speech. On the contrary, once Hashem has allowed the heart to reach Him, we must ask what kind of mouth we want to have in the coming year. Can it become a mouth that

encourages rather than wounds? A mouth that praises rather than complains? A mouth that knows when to speak and when to remain silent? The shofar bypasses this year's obstruction so that we can begin repairing next year's road.

And there is a remarkable story that captures what it means to find another route when the ordinary route is blocked.

Story One: The Boy Who Crossed the Barricade

Before the Second World War, the Kindertransport brought nearly ten thousand mostly Jewish children from Nazi-controlled Europe to safety in Britain. The children escaped, but most had to leave their parents behind. They arrived in a strange country, speaking unfamiliar languages, carrying labels and small suitcases, not knowing whether they would ever see their families again.

Among those children was a twelve-year-old boy named Berel—or Beryl—Gartner. According to the account he later related, he was brought to an orphanage in England. While other children gradually began adjusting, Berel remained inconsolable. Toys did not help. Sweets did not help. Reassurances did not help. He wanted only one thing: his mother and father.

Someone finally asked him, "Berel, what would make you stop crying?"

He answered that he wanted a private meeting with the King of England.

It sounded impossible, but word came that King George VI would soon be passing through the area. The adults told Berel that perhaps he would be able to see the king. Berel took the possibility seriously. For weeks, he prepared. He was taught how to stand, how to speak respectfully, and how to behave in the presence of royalty. In his young mind, he was not preparing to watch a parade. He was preparing to speak to the king.

The long-awaited day arrived. Crowds filled the town square. A barricade separated the people from the royal route. Berel was placed behind that barricade with everyone else.

Then he understood. There would be no private audience. He would see a carriage pass for a few seconds and perhaps wave. But that was not why he had come. His parents were still trapped, and he believed that the king was the one person who might be able to help.

As the royal carriage approached, Berel made a decision. He jumped the barricade and ran toward it.

The guards immediately seized him and brought him to the ground. There was confusion and shouting. But the commotion reached the king. King George saw that a child was being restrained and instructed the guards to let him come forward.

Berel approached the carriage. He had practiced for weeks, but now, standing before the king, he could barely speak. King George VI himself was known to have struggled painfully with a speech impediment. He understood what it meant for

words to become trapped. He waited patiently and encouraged the frightened child.

Finally, Berel found enough words to explain that he had been brought from Germany and that his parents remained behind. The ache would not leave him. He had come to ask the king to bring his parents to England.

The king was taken aback. Britain was at war. This was not an ordinary request. He explained that bringing Berel's parents out might be impossible.

But Berel answered with the simple faith of a child: "But you are the king. You told me to say what I need. Please bring me my parents."

King George promised that he would do everything within his power.

Some time later, there was a knock at the orphanage. Somehow, through efforts Berel could not have understood, his parents had been brought out and reunited with him.

Berel did not possess the right connections. He could not follow the normal procedure. The barricade was designed to keep him where he was. But the need in his heart was too great for him to remain a spectator while the king passed by.

Berel crossed a physical barricade to reach a human king. On Rosh Hashanah, the shofar crosses the barricade created by all the words we cannot find.

There is an additional poignancy. King George understood a child struggling to speak because he knew something about the struggle for speech. But the Ribbono Shel Olam understands us even before the struggle begins. He hears not only the word that emerged but the word we tried to say. He hears not only the request we formulated but the confusion beneath it. He hears what the tears meant.

For us, living now and standing before Hashem now, the story leaves a question: When Hashem gives us an opening, will we remain behind the barricade? When the heart wants to daven, will we silence it because the words are inadequate? When a mitzvah calls us, will we watch the moment pass?

The shofar has already sounded. For those moments, it carried us past the barricade. But Berel did not merely feel something when the carriage approached. He made a decision and moved.

Tefillah cannot end with emotion. The sound must become a decision.

Seven Days to Answer the Shofar

That brings us to the days immediately ahead.

The shofar expressed everything we want the coming year to become. But Hashem does not ask us to move directly from one enormous Rosh Hashanah resolution into an entire year. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, He gives us one complete week in which to rehearse the year we have just prayed for.

We speak about the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah—the Ten Days of Repentance—but after the two days of Rosh Hashanah

and before Yom Kippur, there are seven days. Those seven days form one complete week: one Sunday, one Monday, one Tuesday, one Wednesday, one Thursday, one Friday, and one Shabbos.

The Arizal's school teaches that each of these days gives us an opportunity to address all the corresponding days of the previous year. The Sunday between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur can repair and elevate the Sundays of the year. Monday can address the Mondays, Tuesday the Tuesdays, and so forth. The Mishnah Berurah records the corresponding practical avodah in the name of the Yaaros Devash:

כי ז' ימים שבין ראש השנה ליום הכפורים הם נגד ז' ימי שבוע ובכל יום יעשה תשובה כל אותו יום דרך משל ביום ראשון יעשה תשובה על מה שחטא כל ימיו ביום ראשון וכן ביום ב' וכן כל ז' ימים

“The seven days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur correspond to the seven weekdays. On each day a person should do teshuvah for that day—for example, on Sunday for what he did on the Sundays of his life, and similarly throughout all seven days.” (Mishnah Berurah 603:2)

This could sound overwhelming, but it is actually a gift. Hashem is not asking us to reconstruct an entire year in one afternoon. He gives us one complete week. One Monday through which to rethink our Mondays. One Friday through which to rethink our Fridays. And one Shabbos through which to establish a new relationship with Shabbos.

That Shabbos is Shabbos Shuvah.

Think about what that means. We have just heard a sound that bypasses words. Now Hashem gives us seven days in which to translate that sound into one visible change. The shofar was the prayer; this complete week is the rehearsal. We do not have to repair everything. We have to take one honest step.

The Quiet Mitzvah Waiting for Us

And now we can place beside the mitzvah of shofar one surprising halachah that we deliberately did not mention at the beginning.

The Shulchan Aruch states:

נשים חייבות בסעודה שלישית

“Women are obligated in the third Shabbos meal.” (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 291:6)

The Mishnah Berurah explains that women share the positive obligations of Shabbos connected to zachor, just as they share its prohibitions connected to shamor. Women were also included in the miracle of the mann, from which Chazal derive the three Shabbos meals.

Now the contrast emerges. Shofar is a mitzvah from which women are exempt, yet so many women make an extraordinary effort to hear it. Shalosh Seudos is a mitzvah in which women are obligated, yet it does not always create the same feeling of urgency.

This is not a criticism of women. Men do the very same thing in other areas. All human beings are attracted to what is dramatic, rare, and emotionally powerful. We can become tremendously inspired by a once-a-year mitzvah while overlooking a quieter mitzvah that returns every week. The rare mitzvah arrives with a shofar blast. The weekly mitzvah may be waiting quietly in the corner.

So our question is not, “Why are people inconsistent?” Our question is more constructive:

Can the mitzvah that moves us emotionally awaken us to the mitzvah that quietly asks for our loyalty?

The explanation is not difficult. Shofar arrives with drama. The entire room becomes silent. The Torah is held. Everyone waits. The sounds are ancient and piercing. Shalosh Seudos arrives late on Shabbos afternoon, when we may not be hungry, when the day has been long, and when it is tempting to say, “I had Kiddush. I had lunch. Surely that is enough.”

But Chazal reveal that the third meal is not an optional extra.

When the Torah describes the mann, Moshe says:

אכלהו היום כי שבת היום לה' היום לא תמצאהו בשדה

“Eat it today, for today is Shabbos for Hashem; today you will not find it in the field.” (Shemos 16:25)

The word “— היום today” appears three times. From these three appearances, Chazal derive the three meals of Shabbos. (Shabbos 117b.)

The third meal is different from the first two. Friday night, we are hungry and ready for supper. Shabbos morning, after davening, Kiddush and lunch are welcome. But by late afternoon, we may not need another meal physically. That is precisely what makes Shalosh Seudos spiritually revealing. We are not present only because the body demanded food. We are present because Shabbos asked us to remain.

There is a tenderness to the final hours of Shabbos. Friday night is the grand entrance of the queen. Shabbos morning is filled with tefillah, Torah, Kiddush, family, and community. Shalosh Seudos is quieter. The light outside begins to change. We sense that Shabbos will soon leave. We sit together, sing, listen to Torah, and say in effect, “We are not rushing you out. We want to remain with you until the end.”

That may be why this meal possesses a special sweetness. It is not the welcome; it is the reluctance to say goodbye.

Chazal also speak of extraordinary spiritual protection associated with honoring all three Shabbos meals. We need not approach that as a formula or guarantee. The message is that a person who enters fully into all three stages of Shabbos is allowing Shabbos to shelter the entirety of life.

Women are not guests in this mitzvah. The Shulchan Aruch says plainly: נשים חייבות בשלש סעודות women are

obligated in Shalosh Seudos. The same siman teaches that the meal should ideally be treated as a genuine Shabbos seudah, with bread and, preferably, lechem mishneh. The Mishnah Berurah adds that when not everyone has lechem mishneh, the person making Hamotzi can have the assembled diners in mind and enable them to participate in his lechem mishneh. Even that detail quietly pictures Shalosh Seudos not merely as an isolated bite of food, but as people joining in a real seudah.

Of course, real life must be acknowledged. A woman may be caring for small children, tending to someone ill, dealing with her own health, or facing circumstances that make attendance at shul impossible. The point is not to judge anyone. Sometimes caring for the person Hashem placed in front of you is itself the holiest way of honoring Shabbos. And

halachah itself tells us that the third meal was not given to cause physical distress.

But where it is possible, perhaps we have an opportunity.

A woman can certainly fulfill Shalosh Seudos in her own home. Coming to the communal Shalosh Seudos is not itself the halachic obligation, and we should not confuse the two. But it is also fair to say that a mitzvah is often easier to perform fully when the chevra creates the environment for it.

Shlomo HaMelech teaches:

ברב־עם הדרת־מלך

“In the multitude of the people is the glory of the King.” (Mishlei 14:28)

That principle does not turn communal attendance into a new obligation. It teaches that when Jews gather to honor Hashem, the gathering itself adds dignity to the mitzvah. Pirkei Avos similarly teaches that when even two Jews sit together and share words of Torah, the Shechinah rests between them. And the established practice is to honor Shalosh Seudos with zemiros and divrei Torah, not only with food.

At home, particularly after a long Shabbos, even with the best intentions, it can be easy to fulfill the mitzvah with the quickest possible bite—or to lose track of it amid everything else. In shul, the complete package is already waiting: proper bread, people making Hamotzi, zemiros, divrei Torah, and a room full of Jews who are deliberately remaining with Shabbos. The group carries each individual, just as each individual strengthens the group.

We come to shul in the morning because tefillah changes when it is held by a tzibbur. In a different halachic category,

something similar can be true experientially of Shalosh Seudos. The obligation is the meal, wherever it is eaten. But the communal setting can help us perform that obligation with greater dignity, greater consistency, and greater feeling.

Last Shabbos, approximately twelve or thirteen women joined the men for Shalosh Seudos at Westmount. That is not merely an attendance figure. Something began. Women came into the room, participated in the atmosphere, heard Torah, sang with the chevra, and helped transform the final hours of Shabbos into a communal moment.

This coming Shabbos is not an ordinary Shabbos. It is Shabbos Shuvah—the one Shabbos in this complete week between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. According to the teaching of the Arizal, it is our opportunity to repair and elevate the Shabbosos of the year that has passed and to create a new direction for the Shabbosos of the year ahead.

Perhaps the shofar you heard this morning can lead to one very practical decision.

The shofar you were not obligated to hear can awaken you to the Shalosh Seudos you are obligated to observe.

Not because we are comparing mitzvos competitively. Not because the beauty of women hearing shofar should be diminished. Exactly the opposite: because a mitzvah you love can introduce you to a mitzvah you may not yet have learned to love.

And that brings us to one final story.

Story Two: What Will Jewish Women Be Doing in 2100?

During the 1990s, a small notice appeared each Friday near the bottom of the front page of The New York Times. It gave the Shabbos candle-lighting time in New York and called upon Jewish women and girls to light. J.J. Gross helped arrange the placement, and a sponsor covered its substantial weekly cost. A few words on a front page that traveled around the world could remind a Jewish woman, perhaps far from an observant community, that Shabbos was about to arrive. When the sponsorship ended in June 1999, the notice disappeared.

Several months later, on January 1, 2000, The New York Times published a special millennium edition. It included a reproduction of a front page from 1900, the actual front page of 2000, and an imaginative front page dated January 1, 2100.

The page from 2100 contained fanciful predictions. It imagined future political developments and technological questions, including whether robots should be permitted to vote. No one knew what the world would actually look like one hundred years later. The page was deliberately speculative.

But at the bottom of that imagined front page was something striking: a notice telling Jewish women and girls when to light Shabbos candles.

The notice itself is documented. A widely repeated account adds that when Times personnel were asked why it had been included, the answer was essentially: “We

do not know what will happen in the year 2100. We cannot predict the future. But of one thing we can be certain—Jewish women will still be lighting Shabbos candles.”

We should be careful: the exact quotation and the identity often assigned to the employee have not been independently

authenticated. But we do not need the quotation to make the point. The page itself says it. When the newspaper’s editors tried to imagine a world a century into the future, they imagined Jewish women still welcoming Shabbos.

That is powerful. Empires rise and fall. Technology changes. Predictions become laughable. The world of 2100 may be almost unrecognizable to us. But somewhere, shortly before sunset on Friday, a Jewish woman will cover her eyes and bring Shabbos into her home.

But let us carry that beautiful picture one step further.

Jewish women have done an extraordinary job guarding the entrance to Shabbos. Through candle lighting, the Jewish woman announces, “Shabbos is here.” If the editors could imagine Jewish women still welcoming Shabbos in 2100, we can ask what we want the whole Shabbos—not only its entrance—to look like in the coming year. Can we also strengthen the way we remain with Shabbos until the end?

The candles say, “Welcome.” Shalosh Seudos says, “Please do not leave so quickly.”

The woman in the imagined year 2100 lights the candles. Perhaps she also sits during the final moments of that Shabbos with family and community, singing, sharing Torah, and allowing the holiness of the day to accompany her into the week.

Perhaps that future begins with one decision made on this Rosh Hashanah.

What Did Your Shofar Ask For?

We can now return to the opening question.

What was your shofar praying for this morning?

Perhaps it was praying for health. Perhaps for peace in a family. Perhaps for a child or grandchild. Perhaps for clarity. Perhaps for forgiveness. Perhaps it carried something you could not name.

We trust that Hashem heard it.

The shofar was the bypass. It carried the heart past the obstruction of language. It allowed us to approach the King without pretending that we possessed a perfect speech or a perfect year.

But now the sound asks us for an answer.

Berel Gartner did not remain behind the barricade. Generation after generation, so many Jewish women have refused to allow the shofar to pass them by. And this coming week, Shabbos Shuvah will offer us another opening.

So I would like to extend a simple invitation. If your circumstances permit, join us this Shabbos for Shalosh Seudos. You do not have to promise what every Shabbos of the coming year will look like. Begin with this Shabbos. Come because it is Shabbos Shuvah. Come because these seven days are a gift. Come because the shofar should not remain only a sound that moved us for a few minutes.

Let the sound become a decision.

We began by asking why women make such a great effort for a mitzvah they are not obligated to perform. Jewish women did not ask only what they were required to do. They recognized a mitzvah their neshamos did not want to live without. They heard in the shofar a prayer too deep for words.

Now let that beloved mitzvah awaken another one.

The shofar helped us reach the King. Shalosh Seudos can help us bring His presence into the year.

May Hashem hear the tefillah contained in every sound we heard this morning. May He hear the tefillos we were able to articulate and those we could not. May He help us repair the words we speak, strengthen the Shabbos we keep, and transform inspiration into faithful action.

And may all of us, our families, our community, Eretz Yisrael, and all of Klal Yisrael be written and sealed for a year of life, health, peace, berachah, and genuine closeness to Hashem.

Kesivah vachasimah tovah.

Principal Sources

1. Women and shofar: Shulchan Aruch and Rema, Orach Chaim 589:3 and 589:6. The tefillah dimension of shofar explains spiritual attachment; it does not create a new formal obligation.
2. Women and Shalosh Seudos: Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 291:6; Mishnah Berurah 291:26.
3. Bent shofar: Rosh Hashanah 26b.
4. Channah: I Shmuel 1:13; Berachos 31a.
5. Shofar as tefillah without words: a conceptual teaching developed in the Brisker tradition and by later Torah teachers.
6. The bypass image is attributed to the Chafetz Chaim. It presents the shofar as an additional route for the heart while retaining our responsibility to repair ordinary speech and tefillah.

7. The seven corresponding days: the school of the Arizal; Mishnah Berurah 603:2, citing Yaaros Devash, I, Derush 1.
8. Three Shabbos meals: Shemos 16:25; Shabbos 117b. Protection associated with the three meals: Shabbos 118a.
9. Communal Shalosh Seudos: Shulchan Aruch and Rema, Orach Chaim 291:4; Mishnah Berurah 291:21; Mishlei 14:28; Pirkei Avos 3:2-3; Maamar Mordechai, Hilchos Shabbos, chapter 21, paragraph 22. These sources describe the fuller character of the communal setting without making attendance at shul an independent obligation.
10. Berel/Beryl Gartner: the account related by this Kindertransport survivor has been repeated in published Torah sources and is presented as personal testimony.
11. The New York Times story: the January 1, 2000 millennium issue's imagined 2100 front page and its Shabbos candle-lighting notice are documented. The accompanying employee quotation is a widely reported account; the frequently added identification of the speaker as an "Irish Catholic production manager" has not been verified.